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HOMEMAkers' CHAT

Thursday, February 2, 1939

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SUBJECT: "GROUND HOGS AND WEATHER." Information from the Bureau of Biological Survey, U.S.D.A. Publication available: "Woodchuck Control in the Eastern States," Leaflet No. 21.

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If every ground hog in the United States were to come out looking for its shadow today, according to the old legend about February second, as many of these animals would appear as there are adult people in this country. That's the good-natured guess of a Department-of-Agriculture biologist who knows about our native wild animal population. The biologists have taken no census of the ground hogs of this country, as they have of many other animals. The ground hog isn't that important. It only gets attention on this one day of the year when it is mistakenly supposed to be a weather prophet, or later in the spring when it may sometimes be a nuisance to the farmer by burrowing in meadows and cultivated fields or by feasting on forage crops. In general the biologists describe the ground hog as a "harmless interesting animal", although at least one State considers it a game animal. Its fur isn't of much use except to make winter caps for farm boys. Its meat is edible though not very tempting.

As to the idea that the ground hog can predict weather six weeks in advance, both the biologists and the weather experts agree that there's nothing to it. It's one of those quaint old weather superstitions passed down from dear knows when or where. It may have come from Europe where people have a similar legend about the hedge hog's appearance on Candlemas Day. (The hedge hog happens to be a very different animal from the ground hog.) But because the name given to this date is "ground hog day", the superstition probably was first taken up in the South, perhaps by the negroes. Farther north the name for this animal is woodchuck.

The biologists say the woodchuck or ground hog is the eastern American member of the marmot family. Beside the woodchucks of the eastern States and Canada, the family includes the yellow-footed marmots of the western States and British Columbia; and the hoary marmots of the Rocky Mountains.

As to the woodchuck's habits, the biologists say these animals live mostly in pairs or family groups in burrows which they dig for themselves, preferably underneath rocks. They usually stay close to the earth but occasionally climb into trees and bushes. Their food is mostly clover, grass or alfalfa, though at times they gnaw the bark of young trees. But there's considerable truth implied in the old tongue-twister: "How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck would chuck wood?" for this animal has very little to do with wood.

The ground hog is thickset and clumsy, with short stout legs and a short, flat, hairy tail. It is built for underground work but not for speed. So its safety lies in staying near a hole in the ground. You've probably often seen a woodchuck in its characteristic pose--standing erect on its haunches, alert and

ready to dive into its hole. You may have noticed its short broad head; short, broad, round ears; and heavy fur coat. It has a dense soft underfur on its back and sides and longer coarser hair over its whole body. The underfur is usually grey or brown, tipped with a lighter color and the longer hairs are brown or black, tipped with buff or white.

Woodchucks seldom make any sound but when they are alarmed they give a loud shrill whistle. This is the reason that the French Canadian name for the animal is "siffleur", or whistler.

The woodchuck does not store food for winter and would probably starve when its food is dead or frozen up if it could not take a long winter sleep. It fattens itself during the summer and early fall, especially on the new grass that grows when the rains come after haying time. Then in September or October it leaves the meadows and open fields for the woods, curls up in its burrow, and goes to sleep. During sleep it appears to be dead. An observer would have to use instruments to detect its breathing.

For weeks before hibernation the woodchuck becomes more and more sleepy and sluggish. Whereas it usually comes out of its hole several times a day and often by moonlight, late in the fall it only appears in the heat of the day when it suns itself drowsily. But in the spring after its winter nap, it is alert, energetic and hungry. If there is snow on the ground, it will tunnel to the green grass for food. This is the season when it uses up most of its stored fat. During the winter it doesn't need calories for energy, only to help keep it warm. Spring is the time when active hungry woodchucks sometimes make trouble for the farmer by digging burrows in fields or eating new grass or crops.

Perhaps you wonder what wakes the woodchuck up and brings it out in the spring. Warm weather is the answer--enough warmth to be felt way down in its burrow. A spell of warm weather may bring it out in the winter. This doubtless accounts for the times when woodchucks have been seen out in December, January, and early February. If the woodchuck goes back for further sleep, which it often does, cold weather is the reason rather than fear at the sight of its own shadow.

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